

LEADING CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This case study illustrates the leadership practices exercised by Dr. P. Ramaswamy in his organization that helped resolve a number of issues and situations. This case explores various management issues such as sensitivity, open discussion, conflict management and group empowerment in decision making. Learning output from this case reflects the leadership theories in modern day practice.

KEYWORDS: Challenges, Leadership, Processes

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INTRODUCTION

"Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding." - Kahlil Gibran

Exordium

Dr. P. Ramaswamy was excited. As he held his new order he clearly remembers that change had its reasons. It was 17th August 2009. He had just got his extraordinary leave¹ curtailed and had joined his position as Associate Professor of Economics in his parent department in his home State in mid-April 2009. Yet another academic year was just gaining momentum, and there was a challenging opportunity ahead:

My family commitments made me leave Alliance Business School Bangalore² where I worked as Associate Professor of Economics and Finance and come back to my State. At the Government College where I worked before, I was back after almost a year. The college had just commenced yet another academic year and I was busy in my teaching schedule.

Challenge on the Mountain

At a very short notice he was asked to take charge of another Government College in another part of the State as the Acting Principal and had to join his new office and new position from the very next day.

I was referring to some reading material in the college library in the afternoon of 17th August 2009. I had just interacted with one of my students regarding the reading material that I had suggested for an upcoming class presentation. Somebody told me that an official order was served through a special messenger³ in the college office and that it pertained to my transfer to one of our sister concerns.

¹ Extraordinary leave is granted to a Government employee to take up employment in the private sector. An employee rejoin Government service at the end or before the expiry of this leave period

² Now Alliance University Bangalore

³ Special messenger is a term that is used to describe hand delivery of official correspondence that has to be delivered urgently. A person is specially sent to deliver the correspondence.

Hurrying to the college office, I collected my order. It stated that I was transferred with immediate effect and contained instructions to take over the charge of Acting Principal at the College where I was transferred.

Anxious Moments

Moments of apprehension stirred his mind as Dr. Ramaswamy always believed that with power came greater responsibility. He was a firm believer that whenever you were given the charge and authority, enormous responsibility was also thrust on you. Thus, he was a little apprehensive when the offer came to him.

As I read and re-read the contents of the letter, apprehension gripped me. Heading a college was a responsible task considering the number of stakeholders. As my colleagues gathered to congratulate me, thoughts raced in my mind. Would I be able to do it? Would I be able to do justice to the faith reposed in me by my superiors in the Government? Would I be able to adjust to the new situation? Would others be able to adjust to me?

Taking Stock

At the same time he knew that during his almost two decade old teaching career, he had picked up some administrative skills on the way which gave him the confidence that he could shoulder the new responsibility. Thus, with a clear conscience and honest belief, he looked forward to the next day.

As the initial apprehensions settled down I recalled my present work profile in the college. I had headed practically every working committee in the college. This had given me a feel of the functioning of the college administration. I knew that my rich and varied experience at Alliance Business School, Bangalore where I was assigned teaching as well as administrative responsibilities would support my journey ahead. This gave me the confidence to take the new assignment.

Spot Assessment

Dr. Ramaswamy inherited an organization that had certain processes in place but these processes were being managed autocratically. The college was functioning through many committees.

However clichés, psylos and bias is all that he noticed in the culture of the college. What pained him was to see groupism among the various members especially among the faculty members. There existed a clear disconnect between these various groups.

As far as the students were concerned two annual functions used to take place in the college. One was for prize distribution and second was a social gathering. The prize distribution function was held in the college to felicitate the outstanding students and was considered as the function of the management/authorities. The social gathering was largely considered as the students' function. It was held in the town hall and was managed largely by the students. A small number of the college functionaries would actually stay till the end of this function. A feeling was created as 'our' function and 'their' function. Somewhere a 'we' feeling was missing.

I had my share of discouragement. When I got a feel of the disparate forces in the organization I wondered. How and when could I bring them together? When I asked a colleague what was the major activity scheduled in the immediate future, pat came the reply. "Two major activities – the college prize distribution function and the students' social gathering." I was convinced that something had to be done for us to think as one organization.

Initial Days

The day of joining the new college was a trial by fire. The change of guard wasn't smooth. Some expectant and some hostile faces greeted Dr. Ramaswamy. Although this did make Dr. Ramaswamy a little uneasy, in a positive frame of mind he decided to leave this behind and carry the task at hand.

Dr. Ramaswamy knew that the interests of all the stakeholders would have to be considered for any success to be achieved. He strongly believed that students were the primary stakeholders in a college and their welfare was of paramount interest. Once when the students had approached him in his earlier institution for extension of time to use the college library, he had taken up their cause with the higher authorities. It was important as the Principal and head of the institution to connect with his present students and make them understand the vision of the college; align the students to this vision and make it a shared vision.

A proactive approach appeared most appealing to begin with quipped Dr. Ramaswamy. Without wasting much time, he decided to go and visit the classes and address the students. As he moved from one class to another the simmering differences among various entities were palpable.

As the Acting Principal, while addressing each class, he passed on a very clear message to his students that he was a professional and that their interests were very close to his heart. "I am here to safeguard your interests" he announced. He drove home the point that the principal, faculty, parents, students, were all stakeholders but the primary stakeholders were the students and that he would leave no stone unturned to initiate a process that would benefit them. "You my students are the prime reason for all of us to be here, and I want you to excel in all your endeavours" he stated. This brought instant dividends by helping in building a strong bridge between him and the students.

Day one in office progressed with a meeting with the non-teaching staff. He emphasized their importance in running the organization. "Everybody has a critical role to play in the system no matter what his/her position is in the hierarchy" he stated. He initiated an open door policy by telling them that they could approach him regarding any problem and that he would be willing to listen to them.

From there, he went on to informally interact with the faculty members.

The third day after taking over his new assignment was a day he eagerly looked forward to. He had scheduled the first staff meeting and was excited about the prospect of meeting the faculty and formally sharing his plans. "My dear colleagues, we need to work in a collaborative spirit. If we don't, we will have to blame only ourselves because the institution will be ruined" he cautioned. In the interest of the organization, it was best for all the stakeholders to work together.

Dr. Ramaswamy also spoke of his belief in transition. He said that everything has to change and the fact that he was there as the Acting Principal could change any moment if the Government wished so. In order to give meaning to his role as the Principal, he aspired to impact every stakeholder bringing in a sustainable difference by making every day in office count. "I am aware that I am just an Acting Principal. The temptations are real to take it easy. But that is not the way I work" he said. He broke the formality by inviting the staff to come up to him with any issue and suggested that probably they could discuss it over a walk in the campus or over a cup of tea. "We may not agree on all issues at all times. But nothing stops us from talking out these issues. We may not even wait for a formal occasion to speak on these issues." he emphasized. This broke the ice with the teaching staff and the apprehensions surfacing in the minds of the staff members

began to diminish. His democratic way of leadership came to the fore as he was forthcoming and was open to the idea of discussing issues with his colleagues as well as with other subordinates.

The issue of fragmentation among various entities was addressed to by seeking to get everyone on board and convincing them to put their hands together to the common wheel.

As I moved from one lecture hall to another, I was greeted by expectant and anxious faces of the students. I greeted them and talked about how their interests were close to my heart. A nod here and a nod there convinced me that I had made my point to them. The non-teaching staff is the least considered in an educational institution. I spelt out the crucial role that they could play by providing the support services. I promised to look into their grievance which they mentioned to me during the interaction. I went to each and every faculty member⁴, sat with them and exchanged pleasantries. The subsequent staff meeting with the faculty enabled me to formally share my thoughts with them. Misgivings were laid to rest. I sought their partnership in taking the college forward. I honestly believed that each member in the system was crucial for bringing about a change.

Gaining Momentum

Things were not very smooth in managing the educational institution. Man made obstacles cropped up constantly that threatened to disrupt the peace and tranquility in the college. Disgruntled elements with an axe to grind against the Acting Principal spared no effort to destabilize the college. Poisoning the young minds to turn against the authorities and even coercing them to have a direct confrontation on non-issues were resorted to. Deliberate attempts were made to make the Acting Principal's stay in the college more and more difficult with every passing day.

Many students confided in me that they were told to 'gherao'⁵ the Principal. The very fact that they confided in me convinced me that they would not be easily misled by the one who was giving the instructions. My open interaction with my students helped to nip in the bud all attempts to create a law and order problem in the campus.

The Helping Hand

Solutions were to be found to certain issues which were left unresolved before Dr. Ramaswamy could take over. At times it became very difficult to handle the situations. Nevertheless, he dealt with every hurdle in a dignified manner, reporting to his boss the Director of Higher Education whenever it was necessary and seeking his advice. His courteous, polite and compassionate attitude to people even when he was not in a position to help them in solving issues due to legal constraints, helped him to win the confidence of people who previously held preconceived notions about his role in the organization. Difficult times could be handled effectively thanks to the strong support that came from his family and a close circle of friends.

Having a caring boss certainly helped. I could discuss any issue with him and he would listen and give his guidance. I benefitted immensely from his administrative experience. His frequent reassurances and feedback about my performance gave me the confidence to move ahead. I also benefitted from the additional assignments he gave me. Once when he was out of station he instructed me to oversee the recruitment process. Although a challenge, I could do it.

⁴ Faculty members are spread into three staff rooms

⁵ The term 'gherao' refers to physical detention of an individual by a crowd or a group

Cool, Caring, Firm

In spite of internal hitches and obstacles, which were created by certain elements, Dr. Ramaswamy maintained his balance. A signature campaign by some outside elements in the campus, threatened to vertically split the student community in the college. The various sections were listened to. Some were firmly asked to leave the campus. Firm and tactful approach helped to meet many a challenge of such nature. Following in the footsteps, many in the college prioritized the organization above themselves. They put in their efforts and ensured that the larger picture did not get lost in the bargain. Impulsive decisions were kept under check. The focus on the vision and mission of the organization was never lost.

One of the prime responsibilities of the job was to cater to the special needs of the underprivileged sections of the society who were enrolled in the college. These students were helped by going that extra mile. At other times when students came up with personal issues, he helped them to resolve the same using his HR skills. This approach helped in cementing the bonds with the students. The students looked upon Dr. Ramaswamy as their confidante. The meetings and interactions with the Parent Teacher Association facilitated the creation of a very good rapport with the parents and convinced them that both the faculty and they were jointly responsible and accountable in building the students' careers and values. One morning a parent came trembling in his office. Somebody had fixed a pamphlet outside the college premises maligning the name of his daughter. The daughter was depressed. Could the Principal do something? The parent was assured about the support from the college. The faculty members comprising the Convener of the Discipline Committee and the Chairperson of the Committee to Check Sexual Harassment of Women were immediately called in the office.

After a brief discussion, the Principal along with the parent and the two faculty members visited the Police station in the town. A written complaint from the college yielded instant response from the police in booking the suspect who happened to be an outsider with no link with the college. The father went home relieved. His fear and anxiety vanished.

Attempts were made by vested interests to create trouble. However a firm, tactful and caring attitude helped to resolve matters.

I was kept in the dark about the identity of the chief Guest for one of the functions in the college by the teacher in-charge. To my surprise I found that the person happened to be somebody who had tried to foment trouble in the campus in the past. Instead of reacting at that moment and making a scene I decided to take up the issue later. An unpleasant situation was avoided. One day I saw a differently abled student struggling to read in my class. When I enquired about the matter after the lecture, she told me about her problem. I immediately got in touch with friends in the apex Medical College of the State for their opinion and for the renewal of the disability certificate from the Ophthalmology department. I have now adopted a policy to co-opt differently abled students in the Students' Council on the basis of affirmative action. In another case I had to comfort and help a parent who was distressed because of financial difficulty. I chipped in with my own personal contribution.

Demands of the Job

The job was not a cozy 9.00 to 5.00 job. While the punching in time was certain the punching out time was not. Immense personal sacrifices were necessary to cope with the demands and responsibilities that were associated with the job. It took a heavy toll on family life. Even under these moments of tension and uncertainty, the leader never gave up on

his vision. The responsibility that he had undertaken the day he took up the position was adhered to in a sincere manner throughout and the passion to make a perceptible change in the lives of the stakeholders continued. Though he was not sure of his position in the organization in the years to come, Dr. Ramaswamy never compromised with his responsibilities. He spared no efforts to ensure that benefits accrued to all the stakeholders in the organization that he was heading.

There are times when I have worked with my boss the Director of Higher Education, late in his office. The centralized recruitment process at the beginning of every academic year is a testing time for all. However after the completion of any assignment, the satisfaction is immense.

Expressing Effectively the New Approach

As regards the difficult situations Dr. Ramaswamy strived to tackle them more effectively by learning to express himself in a different way.

Once a group of students defied the authorities and organized an event outside the campus. It was already decided by the Students' Council not to have the event. Instead of reacting and getting angry about it, Dr. Ramaswamy called the parents for a meeting and briefed them about the incident. The parents and their children assured that it would not happen again. It did not happen again. Students who were instigated to make a false representation against the college have realized their mistake. They have gone to shoulder important responsibilities in the college and have earned the trust of everyone.

The Dividend

The new approach had improved the quality of relationships and had deepened the sense of personal empowerment of all stakeholders. It was not unusual for students and faculty to approach the head of the institution and talk out what bothered them. Each member of the 'family' at the Government College had realised the importance of being responsible for one's action. Even if the Principal was not present, processes ensured that things got done. Stakeholders were convinced that with freedom came accountability. The processes in the college had become robust.

Dr. Ramaswamy Recalled

Once I had to attend an official function outside the state. At the same time there were important activities and assignments in the college. I explained the situation to my colleagues. They rose up to the occasion and things went on smoothly. I trusted my colleagues to perform their tasks once they have taken the responsibility for the same. The moment the work is distributed it is a reflex action to start doing one's bit immediately. Today I can count on many of my colleagues to shoulder any responsibility and be rest assured it will be done.

Extended Family

Ex-students dropped by and volunteered their services to train the students in specific sports disciplines and in organizing events. The college bagged two silver medals at the inter-collegiate Power-lifting and Weight-lifting tournaments conducted by the affiliating University in the academic year 2012-13. The college had an enviable record of bagging the Women's Kabaddi championship four times in a row and the Men's championship two times in a row. It was a nice feeling to see even ex-students coming to cheer the college Kabaddi teams whenever and wherever they played.

Ramesh our ex-student walked in my chamber. He had come to see how we were preparing for the upcoming Power-lifting and Weight-lifting championship. I told him to see for himself. He returned from the Spots room and

said, "May I offer my services to coach the team"? I was overjoyed.

The parents had realized that they are equal partners in the education process. Many an issue would have gone out of hand if it was not for the preemptive action of the parents.

Mr. Balakrishna, one of the parents telephoned to say that he wanted to meet me. I told him to come over. He was apprehensive about a group of students from some other institution visiting our college unauthorisedly and misleading our students. He had gathered this information from one of his relatives. The information proved very vital in helping the college in stopping the unauthorised visit.

The Parents Teachers Association (PTA) readily volunteered to be partner in organizing events. The immense passion for Kabaddi in the surrounding villages had motivated the ex-students, the Sports Council and the PTA to conduct the State level Invitational Kabaddi Tournament in collaboration with the State Kabaddi Association.

Touching Lives

The humane approach had arrested the drop out rate in the college. Two major reasons were responsible for students to drop out; financial difficulties and lack of motivation resulting in lack of satisfactory and mandatory attendance during any given semester. Proactive action has helped bring down the trend drastically.

Mariamma, a widow, and mother of Manu our student was called to the college. I gave her an update about her son's attendance. When she was shown the attendance records she was surprised that her son was absenteeing from college without valid reason. Her surprise turned to despair when she realized that her son could be detained for lack of attendance. Her hard earned money would be wasted. There were two months to go before the close of the semester. After counselling the son in the presence of his mother, the boy made up for his attendance and saved the semester. I was happy. For me it was yet another career saved.

Celebrating Successes

As Dr. Ramaswamy looked back, he was a satisfied man. The college was considered a pushover by other colleges in the past. It had progressed swiftly. Winning in core areas of sports events had become a habit. "I have seen my boys and girls decimate the opposition on the sports field" exclaims Dr. Ramaswamy. Academic results had their own story to tell. "I am happy with the results of my college in the final year examination conducted by the affiliating University⁶ over the past years. In the Commerce stream we got cent per cent result in 2011-12." said Dr. Ramaswamy. PTA meetings attract large number of parents and the hall gets jam-packed. In one of the meetings, parents were eager to share their valuable suggestions. An informal gathering over lunch at the end of the semester by the faculty was a welcome sign. There is a lot of camaraderie among the members. The 18th State Yuva Mahotsav⁷ co-organized by the college with the State Bhasha Mandal⁸ was a stupendous success. This was an event on a massive scale pushing the organizational skills to their limit. Yet the college came out with flying colours. "Although we had committees for the event, our sharing of responsibilities was seamless. No one said it was not her/his job. This is unusual in a Government set up. That is why we are different" said Dr. Ramaswamy, satisfaction writ large on his face. The college bagged two first places in the

⁶ The college is affiliated to the State University. The students in the college receive their graduation degree from the State University which conducts the examination.

⁷ An annual Youth Festival conducted in the State over a two day period involving thousands of youth.

⁸ An organization that promotes the mother tongue of the State

competitions organized at the Mahotsav.

CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Ramaswamy knew that expressing himself effectively was easier said than done and was in fact a continuous process. Yet this approach and his leadership style had so far paid handsome dividends. But would this leadership style yield the same results in the future? The college had to go in for reaccreditation by the NAAC⁹ in a year's time. Additional space had to be found for the increased enrolment. Apart from teaching, teachers had to be geared towards research. The issue of contract non-teaching staff had to be settled. New recruits had to come in to man the vacant positions that would arise after superannuation of some employees. There was already a strain due to manpower shortage. As Dr. Ramaswamy sat in his chair gently tapping the pen on his forehead pondering over these and other issues, he had to decide his next move. The tea on the table had become cold. What would his next move be?

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⁹ National Assessment and Accreditation Council is an accreditation body which accredits colleges every five years.